

A L E T T E R

ADDRESSED TO

THE LORD CHANCELLOR,

ON THE STUDY OF

A N A T O M Y,

&c.

BY JAMES C. SOMERVILLE, M.D.

"Hic vitæ subvenit mors."

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MY LORD,

THE difficulties which have impeded the prosecution of anatomical studies in this country have become so great, that if the legislature does not interfere, the acquirement of that knowledge, which is the foundation of every department in medicine and surgery, must either be abandoned, or sought for abroad.

If it is only to be acquired abroad, the number of students whose circumstances enable them to complete their education must be confined to narrow limits, in consequence of which, the exercise of the profession will fall

into the hands of ignorant men, and the poorer classes will be the immediate sufferers. So well aware of this are those who feel as they ought the responsibility of treating the sick and the wounded, that every corporate body of the profession rigorously exacts a well-grounded knowledge of anatomy from all, to whom the legal authority to exercise any branch of medicine or surgery is granted.

The improved methods of performing many surgical operations, as well as the less frequent recurrence to operation now than formerly, sufficiently show the advantages of more profound anatomical investigations.

The law of the land concurs with the incorporated institutions of the profession, in requiring anatomical skill in those who undertake the care of the health of their fellow-creatures, and fines have been inflicted by the tribunals, when a jury has deemed the practitioner deficient in competent skill. But while the laws are vigilant in punishing ignorance, by an unaccountable contradiction they equally punish the means of acquiring the very knowledge

they exact. In the case of the *King v. Lynn*, the defendant was fined for removing a body from a burying-ground for the purpose of dissection.

The *King v. Cundick*, an undertaker, the defendant was indicted for having disposed of the body of an executed felon for dissection, and on conviction was punished. In the case of the *King v. Davies and others*, students in medicine, who were tried at Warrington for having a dead body in their possession for the purpose of dissection, the defendants were found guilty and received judgment in Westminster, on the 19th of May, 1828.

The awkward dilemma in which the profession has thus been placed, has called forth repeated appeals to the government, which have, however, hitherto failed in obtaining the desired relief, so essential to the best interests of the community, and more especially to the working classes; for the rich will be able to pay for the skill acquired in more liberal countries, while the poor will inevitably be consigned to half-educated men, and it will be their fate to have

their living bodies mangled, in order to save their dead bodies from examination.

The chief supply of dead bodies for the schools of anatomy has been derived from the robbery of the grave. Those who exercise this odious trade are generally men who have sunk through the grades of vice and depravity, before they have assumed the vocation of resurrectionists, which unfortunately is not the last degree of their iniquity. The nature and essence of crime is to harden its perpetrators, till the guilty end their career by doing boldly that from which, in the commencement, they would have shrunk. Instances are not wanting in which relatives of the deceased have been murdered, while defending the graves from the depredators.

When the students of anatomy were but few compared with the present number, owing to the smaller population, with fewer openings for medical men in the army, navy, in our extensive colonies, or in civil life, the few bodies required were quietly procured at a low price; But when the value of anatomical knowledge

was spread in the country by the meritorious labours of the Hunters, students flocked from all parts to the metropolis, for the laudable purpose of acquiring professional knowledge from those able teachers. The demand for dead bodies naturally increased with the augmented desire of knowledge, and with the increased demand the price of bodies rose, and with it the daring of the violators of churchyards kept pace. Nothing can well be imagined, more repulsive to the feelings of teachers of anatomy, than the painful necessity in which they found themselves placed, of having recourse to the services of such men ; circumstances, however, reduced them to that, or the alternative of giving up their schools.

No redress having been obtained from government, the House of Commons, on the motion of the member for Bridport, appointed a committee to inquire into the state of the schools of anatomy, and the evidence produced before that committee furnishes a full elucidation of the difficulties which go far to render the study of anatomy impracticable. In conse-

quence of the inquiry instituted by the committee, it was deemed expedient and necessary that a Bill should be brought into Parliament, in order to remove the difficulties proved to exist in this most indispensable study. But the Bill was not allowed a second reading by the Lords.

It seems obvious, that the first step in removing the difficulties, whatever the plan may be, by which it is intended to attain an object so desirable, should be to remove the legal obloquy attached to dissection, by its forming a portion of the sentence awarded to the worst class of criminals—murderers. Some degree of prejudice, at least, is founded upon this, and moreover, an argument against dissection is built upon it by those who are at more pains to excite than to allay prejudice. It is besides not very flattering to so respectable a branch of the profession to make its members executors of any part of the criminal code—a branch, save in this instance, only known to the poor by acts of humanity and kindness in their distress. It is a fact that a strong feeling

against dissection, in the event of death in hospitals, has often been expressed by patients and their friends, because it was treating them like murderers. If legislators conceive that the influence of this part of the sentence, which consigns the bodies of murderers to dissection, tends in any degree to repress the crime, it would surely be desirable that the office should be performed by some one duly qualified to satisfy the law by completing the executioner's work, or some other stigma might be substituted.

Too great severity cannot be enforced against those who are convicted of robbing the grave ; but the interposition of the legislature will furnish a more effectual security against the nefarious practices of the body-snatchers, than the dread of punishment. By rendering the dead body no longer a marketable article—by depriving it of value, the temptation to become possessed of it by murder would be immediately removed. It ought to be distinctly understood, and honestly observed, that the body of no one should be dissected contrary to a

desire expressed by that person in his life-time, or after his decease, by any relative.

But the precaution will soon be found superfluous—for what motive could an anatomist have to encounter a difficulty, by trespassing on the feelings of the living, when such abundant opportunities could be found, in various charitable institutions, where there is not a relative even to follow the funeral. On the admission of a patient into some hospitals, it is not unusual to require from the friends a security to exonerate the establishment from the contingency of funeral expenses—a regulation which could only have arisen from the tax thus incurred. In order to remove the temptation to procure subjects for anatomy by committing murder, it is necessary that the sale of dead bodies should be effectually put down by supplying the schools of anatomy from sources, not sanctioned only, but protected by government.

It has been proposed to limit the number of bodies dissected, and to impose restrictions upon the schools—measures which are fraught

with objections, and therefore claiming the calmest consideration; for it is obvious, that he who dissects most assiduously will be the most expert operator; and it is equally clear, that an incompetent teacher will soon be eclipsed and driven from the field by the superiority of his rivals. Much in the path of science remains yet to be discovered to recompense the diligence and indefatigable zeal of future Harveys and future Hunters, in the investigation of the structure, functions, and pathology of the human body, by which alone we can expect solid improvement in medicine and surgery to be founded: the study therefore ought to be fettered as little as possible. If the subjects of anatomy were by law allowed to be furnished by the delivery of unclaimed bodies, the outcry against the study would speedily cease, and the prejudice now kept up would soon die away. Objections more specious than solid have been raised against this source of supply of subjects, such as the injustice of consigning the bodies of the poor to be dissected; but those who have started such

objections with the best intentions, are, perhaps, not aware that the traffic now extensively carried on in dead bodies, is not exclusively derived from the graves of the poor. The business of the resurrectionist is founded in connivance and confederacy; he prowls about churchyards by day for the purpose of forming alliance with grave-diggers and grave-watchers, by whose assistance the robbery is carried on without suspicion, and without danger. It is to be observed that there is often greater facility in stealing a dead body from a vault than from a grave. The subjects on the anatomist's table too often bear unequivocal marks of having come from some other than the pauper's grave; the appearance of hands, face, and skin, and the marks of rings on the fingers, plainly demonstrate that the person has not belonged to the working class. On the inspection of a family vault not long ago, it was found that no less than eighteen coffins were empty. There are few burying-grounds in London that have not a house with a window looking into them, as if placed there for the pur-

pose of stealing dead bodies ; and the value of such situations is well known to resurrection-men and their confederates. In a case of recent occurrence the workmen employed in closing a vault after an interment were persuaded to go to the public-house for a short time, their work being nearly finished ; but on their return the coffin was found empty. Such are the facilities afforded by these situations. But unfortunately bodies are not always obtained from the burying-grounds. The career of Burke in Edinburgh, and Bishop in London, prove that murder has been often committed by such wretches for the purpose of selling the bodies of their victims, and no doubt by many others, whose greater caution in the selection of their subjects, greater skill in the various arts of destroying life, and more circumspection in their dealings, have screened from the hand of justice.

The belief that such horrors were practised led some anatomists to submit the circumstance to the consideration of government in November 1828, previous to the detection of Burke ; but

the statements were thought so far to exceed the extent of human depravity, that they were deemed incredible. Surely no one will now presume to assert that the monopoly of murder was in the hands of Bishop and his associate; they shortened their career of iniquity by foolhardy daring, while others, better skilled in this diabolical art, accomplished by methods which leave no trace that can lead to detection, even from the examination of the body, and are now thriving in their trade, for the exercise of which London furnishes such infinite and unsuspected resources. It is unnecessary to vindicate by one word more the absolute and indispensable necessity of medical men being well versed in human anatomy, which can be acquired in no other way than by practice on the dead body, and still less is it requisite to add arguments to justify the claim which medical men of every branch of the profession have to call for the protection of the laws in the acquirement of that knowledge, which above every other department of science fits a man to gratify the best feelings of the human heart by

enabling him to afford succour and relief to his fellow-creatures, when afflicted with those diseases to which they are liable. Some consideration is also due to the honest pride which every one feels that this country, prosperous and pre-eminent in so many respects, should not be forbidden by law from keeping pace with other countries in the cultivation of any branch of science. Redress of the evils enumerated ought to be granted with no view to any narrow interest, but on the broad basis of encouraging the acquirement of knowledge, not in the metropolis only, but throughout the empire.

I have the honour to be,
 My Lord,
 Your Lordship's most obedient
 and most humble servant,
 JAMES C. SOMERVILLE.

5, Saville Row,
 January 23, 1832.

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